

In the United States Court of Federal Claims
OFFICE OF SPECIAL MASTERS

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MICHELLE BARNETT,

Petitioner,

v.

SECRETARY OF HEALTH
AND HUMAN SERVICES,

Respondent.

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No. 19-1578V

Special Master Christian J. Moran

Filed: November 27, 2023

Brian L. Cinelli, Schiffmacher Cinelli Adoff LLP, Buffalo, NY, for Petitioner;
Alexis B. Babcock, United States Dep't of Justice, Washington, DC, for
Respondent.

DECISION AWARDING ATTORNEYS' FEES AND COSTS¹

On April 11, 2023, petitioner Michelle Barnett moved for final attorneys' fees and costs. She is awarded \$51,714.16.

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On October 10, 2019, petitioner filed for compensation under the Nation Vaccine Injury Compensation Program, 42 U.S.C. §300aa-10 through 34. Petitioner alleged that the influenza vaccination she received on October 14, 2016,

¹ Because this published decision contains a reasoned explanation for the action in this case, the undersigned is required to post it on the United States Court of Federal Claims' website in accordance with the E-Government Act of 2002. 44 U.S.C. § 3501 note (2012) (Federal Management and Promotion of Electronic Government Services). This posting means the decision will be available to anyone with access to the internet. In accordance with Vaccine Rule 18(b), the parties have 14 days to identify and move to redact medical or other information, the disclosure of which would constitute an unwarranted invasion of privacy. If, upon review, the undersigned agrees that the identified material fits within this definition, the undersigned will redact such material from public access.

caused her to develop transverse myelitis. Petition at 1. A fact hearing was held on September 24, 2021, and the undersigned issued his findings of fact on December 10, 2021. On August 31, 2022, petitioner filed a motion for a decision dismissing her petition and on September 2, 2022, the undersigned issued his decision dismissing the petition for insufficient proof. 2022 WL 4458351.

On April 11, 2023, petitioner filed a motion for final attorneys' fees and costs ("Fees App."). Petitioner requests attorneys' fees of \$50,302.00 and attorneys' costs of \$1,412.16 for a total request of \$51,714.16. Fees App. at 4. Petitioner argued that reasonable basis supported her claim because a treating doctor submitted a VAERS report and the treating doctor recommended against future vaccinations. *Id.* at 6. Pursuant to General Order No. 9, petitioner warrants that she has not personally incurred any costs related to the prosecution of her case. Fees App. Ex. 5.

On April 12, 2023, respondent filed a response to petitioner's motion. Respondent argues that "[n]either the Vaccine Act nor Vaccine Rule 13 contemplates any role for respondent in the resolution of a request by a petitioner for an award of attorneys' fees and costs." Response at 1. Respondent adds, however that he "is satisfied the statutory requirements for an award of attorneys' fees and costs are met in this case." *Id.* at 2. Additionally, he recommends "that the Court exercise its discretion" when determining a reasonable award for attorneys' fees and costs. *Id.* at 3. Petitioner did not file a reply thereafter.

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Although compensation was denied, petitioners who bring their petitions in good faith and who have a reasonable basis for their petitions may be awarded attorneys' fees and costs. 42 U.S.C. § 300aa-15(e)(1). In this case, although petitioner's claim was ultimately unsuccessful the undersigned finds that good faith and reasonable basis existed throughout the matter. Respondent has also indicated that he is satisfied that the claim has good faith and reasonable basis. Respondent's position greatly contributes to the finding of reasonable basis. *See Greenlaw v. United States*, 554 U.S. 237, 243 (2008) ("[W]e rely on the parties to frame the issues for decision and assign to courts the role of neutral arbiter of matters the parties present."). A final award of reasonable attorneys' fees and costs is therefore proper in this case and the remaining question is whether the requested fees and costs are reasonable.

The Vaccine Act permits an award of reasonable attorney's fees and costs. §15(e). The Federal Circuit has approved the lodestar approach to determine

reasonable attorneys' fees and costs under the Vaccine Act. This is a two-step process. Avera v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs., 515 F.3d 1343, 1348 (Fed. Cir. 2008). First, a court determines an "initial estimate ... by 'multiplying the number of hours reasonably expended on the litigation times a reasonable hourly rate.'" Id. at 1347-48 (quoting Blum v. Stenson, 465 U.S. 886, 888 (1984)). Second, the court may make an upward or downward departure from the initial calculation of the fee award based on specific findings. Id. at 1348. Here, because the lodestar process yields a reasonable result, no additional adjustments are required. Instead, the analysis focuses on the elements of the lodestar formula, a reasonable hourly rate and a reasonable number of hours.

In light of the Secretary's lack of objection, the undersigned has reviewed the fee application for its reasonableness. See McIntosh v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs., 139 Fed. Cl. 238 (2018).

A. Reasonable Hourly Rates

Under the Vaccine Act, special masters, in general, should use the forum (District of Columbia) rate in the lodestar calculation. Avera, 515 F.3d at 1349. There is, however, an exception (the so-called Davis County exception) to this general rule when the bulk of the work is done outside the District of Columbia and the attorneys' rates are substantially lower. Id. 1349 (citing Davis Cty. Solid Waste Mgmt. and Energy Recovery Special Serv. Dist. v. U.S. Envtl. Prot. Agency, 169 F.3d 755, 758 (D.C. Cir. 1999)). In this case, all the attorneys' work during this period was done outside of the District of Columbia.

Petitioner requests the following hourly rates for the work of her counsel, Mr. Brian Cinelli: \$300.00 per hour for work performed in 2018-2023. These rates are consistent with what counsel has previously been awarded for his Vaccine Program work and they shall be awarded herein. See Cressell v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs., No. 19-286V, 2023 WL 5798246, at *2 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. July 27, 2023); Albers v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs., No. 16-1715V, 2020 WL 8509729, at *2 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Dec. 2, 2020); Stine v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs., No. 17-1389V, 2020 WL 6746986 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Oct. 23, 2020).

B. Reasonable Number of Hours

The second factor in the lodestar formula is a reasonable number of hours. Reasonable hours are not excessive, redundant, or otherwise unnecessary. See Saxton v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs., 3 F.3d 1517, 1521 (Fed. Cir. 1993).

The Secretary also did not directly challenge any of the requested hours as unreasonable.

The undersigned has reviewed the submitted billing entries and finds the request to be reasonable. The billing entries contain sufficient detail to permit the undersigned to assess their reasonableness, and upon review none appear to be objectionable. Respondent also has not indicated that he finds any of the billing entries to be objectionable. Therefore, petitioner is awarded final attorneys' fees in the amount of \$50,302.00.

C. Costs Incurred

Like attorneys' fees, a request for reimbursement of costs must be reasonable. Perreira v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs., 27 Fed. Cl. 29, 34 (Fed. Cl. 1992), aff'd, 33 F.3d 1375 (Fed. Cir. 1994). Petitioner requests a total of \$1,412.16 in costs. This amount is comprised of acquiring medical records, the Court's filing fee, postage, and photocopies. Fees App. Ex. 3 at 31-32. Petitioner has provided adequate documentation to support the requested costs, and all appear reasonable in the undersigned's experience. Petitioner is therefore awarded the full amount of costs requested.

D. Conclusion

The Vaccine Act permits an award of reasonable attorney's fees and costs. 42 U.S.C. § 300aa-15(e). Accordingly, I award a total of **\$51,714.16** (representing \$50,302.00 in attorneys' fees and \$1,412.16 in attorneys' costs) as a lump sum in the form of a check jointly payable to petitioner and her attorney, Mr. Brian Cinelli.

In the absence of a motion for review filed pursuant to RCFC Appendix B, the clerk of the court is directed to enter judgment herewith.²

IT IS SO ORDERED.

s/Christian J. Moran
Christian J. Moran
Special Master

² Pursuant to Vaccine Rule 11(a), the parties may expedite entry of judgment by filing a joint notice renouncing their right to seek review.